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With Key Backing, Gates Is Front-Runner for CIA Post

■ Intelligence: Bush aide failed in bid for job in 1987 because of ties to Iran-Contra affair. President is said to have a short list of candidates.

By DAVID LAUTER
TIMES STAFF WRITER

WASHINGTON—Bolstered by approval from key senators, Deputy White House National Security Adviser Robert M. Gates emerged Wednesday as a clear front-runner to become the next head of the CIA, a job he sought but failed to get four years ago.

Bush has several other possibilities, including former aide James R. Lilley, who is about to leave his current post as U.S. ambassador to China, and Richard J. Kerr, the CIA's current deputy director. Moreover, as one Administration official warned, Bush "has been known to like to pull surprises."

Nonetheless, the 48-year-old Gates is widely touted within the Administration as the best choice to lead the intelligence agency at a time when it faces a major reorganization of its functions and priorities. Gates rose through the CIA's ranks as a Soviet analyst to become its deputy director and, briefly, acting director in 1987.

Once before, he almost got the top job. In 1987, President Ronald Reagan nominated Gates, then the CIA's No. 2 official, to replace William J. Casey as the CIA director. But Gates was forced to withdraw his name after senators charged that he had participated in efforts to conceal the CIA's role in the Iran-Contra scandal. But now, several of those senators say that they have changed their minds about Gates' acceptability.

In the press conference announcing William H. Webster's resignation as director of the CIA, Bush praised Gates as a "worthy man" but said that he does not yet have a nominee in mind. Administration officials, however, said that they expect the President to move quickly to fill the job that he, himself, held during the Gerald R. Ford Administration.

A source who has discussed the issue with Bush said that the President has a "short list" of potential nominees in mind. Lilley, who has been prominently mentioned for the job, appears not to be on the list, the source said.

Other possibilities, the source said, would include Rear Adm. William O. Studeman and retired Gen. William E. Odom, respectively, the current and former heads of the National Security Agency. Gates, however, appears to be at the top of Bush's list, the source added.

Since his troubles over Iran-Contra, Gates has assiduously wooed the Senate. His apparent acceptability now appears to reflect a desire on the part of both Democrats and Republicans on Capitol Hill to put an end to arguments about Iran-Contra as well as an inclination against challenging Bush on a major nomination.

Gates' supporters argue that he would be part of a "new generation" of leaders needed to redirect both the CIA and the rest of the government's far-flung intelligence community.

The director of central intelligence serves as both the operating head of the CIA and as an overseer of all the government's intelligence agencies, which include the NSA, the secret agency that handles the government's electronic eavesdropping and code breaking, and the intelligence arms of the mili-

tary services.

With the decline of the Soviet Union as a direct military threat to the United States, intelligence policy experts both inside and outside the government have argued that the intelligence agencies need to be restructured and redirected to address new problems and handle new technologies.

One of Gates' leading critics in the last round, Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.), said in an interview that "I've got to take another look at the concerns I had in 1987, but I'm not sure they are determinative today."

"I'm not prepared to make a judgment today, standing on one foot," Specter said, but "substantial time has passed" since the Senate last reviewed Gates, "and he has done a good job since."

A spokesman for Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman David L. Boren (D-Okla.) gave a stronger endorsement, saying that his boss "would definitely support a Gates nomination." Since 1987, Boren spokesman David Hoffman said, the intelligence committee "has reviewed Gates' records with a fine-tooth comb" and Boren believes that "he is a very honest man with a lot of integrity."

"If anything," the spokesman added, Boren thinks that "Casey did Gates wrong, using him as a front man."

Sen. William S. Cohen of Maine, the senior Republican on the intelligence panel, said that, while he questioned Gates sharply in 1987, he now believes Gates would be "qualified" for the job.